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ABSTRACT

A variety of classroom techniques for second language vocabulary learning are described, based on the principle that different approaches work with different students under varying conditions. The techniques include: rote rehearsal; the use of visual aids, including items that are acted out by students for the benefit of the class; role-playing; vocabulary learning in a specific cultural context; vocabulary learning through art activities; the root-word approach; mnemonic techniques such as the keyword approach; use of the notion of semantic fields to illustrate conceptual relationships between words; two types of vocabulary learning through music (simple songs, and the suggestopedia method); physical activities, as in Total Physical Response instruction; study of cognates and direct borrowing; study of loan translations; use of soap-opera style drama tapes in the language laboratory; analogies; computer-assisted instruction through drills and games; and synonyms. Investigation of additional channels for vocabulary learning such as journal writing and the recording of new words learned is recommended. (MSE)

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Techniques for Learning Vocabulary

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Foreign language learning has often been viewed primarily as a process of mastering the grammar and only secondarily of learning the sounds and vocabulary of the target language. Little consideration had been devoted to vocabulary acquisition, in teaching and in research, until fairly recently. Now, however, as the focus of foreign language teaching has shifted from grammatical forms to communication in the foreign language, theoriticians, researchers, and teachers alike have gained a greatly increased interest in the learning of vocabulary. In fact, many language theorists now maintain, as indicated by Cooper et al (p. 37), that of the "three major components of language--grammar, phonetics and vocabulary--vocabulary is the most important." For purposes of communication, the word is now recognized as being more important than "either its ending, its position in the sentence or its pronunciation" (Cooper et al, p. 38).

According to Fuller, (p. 5), "There are only two things that you really need to learn when you study a foreign language: words and how to put them together. You just can't learn a language without learning words--lots of them." Admittedly, learning how to put words together involves grammar, and, as

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Fuller stated, that is important, but his second sentence seems to be of paramount importance: "You just can't

learn a language without learning words--lots of them." How many words do you have to learn when you are studying a language? That depends on your needs and desires. To meet one's most fundamental needs in a foreign country, maybe a few hundred words will do. To carry on a simple conversation about basic, general topics you will need a couple thousand words. To read a newspaper and engage in a more serious conversation, at least 5,000 words are needed. But, in order to carry on a sophisticated conversation with near native ability, you must know a lot more than just the words (and how to put them together). To be really fluent you have to control not only 10,000 words but also thousands of contemporary expressions and idioms. One of the most common mistakes beginning language learners make is to assume that each word in English has a more or less equivalent word in the target language and all they have to do is to learn each equivalent and then just plug them all in. Unfortunately, it's much more complicated than that.

But recognizing the importance of learning (and teaching) vocabulary is not enough. Foreign language teachers also need to know how to help their students approach this formidable task of gaining mastery of sufficient words to satisfy

their needs in their chosen foreign language. The solution is not simple. There are many different methods for learning vocabulary, but, as Cooper, et al indicate (p. 38), "There is little conclusive research evidence to support any particular approach. Different learners seem to use different methods at different times and in different circumstances." In other words, no particular method has been demonstrated to be unmistakably the only or even the best method. Rather, there are myriad methods, which for different circumstances and different students all work. This article will review a number of these methods so that teachers can pick and choose which ones might help them to improve their teaching of vocabulary and perhaps underline the extreme importance of vocabulary learning. After all, as Keller has indicated (p. 1), "Vocabulary learning is one of the most complex and tedious aspects of language learning."

Rote Rehearsal. The method which has been used most often is that of rote rehearsal, which has recently come under fire by many theorists as a poor and dull method. However, it will probably remain as a viable and necessary supplement to other techniques. In addition to just sitting down and studying from a list, there are two common variants of this method which are worth considering: 1) writing the words as they are

studied; 2) the use of flash cards. Writing Practice. Students frequently practice writing the words which they are to learn, sometimes saying them aloud as they write them. As Thomas and Dieter indicate (p. 249), "One might suspect that these sorts of practice would be helpful in establishing stable orthographic or phonological representations of the foreign word in memory." They carried out a series of

experiments to determine whether writing down foreign words while they were being studied was efficacious or not. The results of their experiments showed, according to them, that there is a very definite benefit attached to writing foreign vocabulary while studying it.

Flashcards. This method has three distinct positive aspects. First, as indicated with regard to the writing practice technique, the act of writing a word helps fix it in memory. Second, it enables a learner to make use of time which would often otherwise be wasted, because s/he can carry a pack of cards around in his pocket or her purse and pull them out when a minute or two of time is available. And, third, psychological studies have indicated that one learns certain things better through many brief repetitions than through a similar amount of time spent all at once. Thus, 30 two-minute sessions with flash cards might provide more effective

learning than an hour spent studying in one sitting.

Visuals. Especially at the elementary level, the meaning of new lexical items is often conveyed through either glosses in the L1 or by visual presentation: pictures, actions, the use of physical objects, etc. By the intermediate level this technique has often (unfortunately) disappeared from the teacher's repertoire. However, the old adage that one picture is worth a thousand words is not very far off the mark. Some students rely heavily on their sense of vision in the learning process. With almost all students, what has been seen supplements and strengthens what has been heard.

In order to effectively use visuals you need to maintain a picture file, in which you can store not only pictures of objects, but also pictures depicting emotions, feelings, situations, etc. Another valuable visual aid can be your students. According to Cook (p. 836), "Many of the concepts that can be illustrated by a drawing, a picture, or set of objects can be presented more dramatically by having students act them out in front of the class. The classroom thus becomes a stage and the teaching process a play in which the students serve as actors." When using students in this fashion, the teacher should plan everything out carefully in

advance, including which students should play each planned role, in order to avoid possibly embarrassing a student with a bad spur-of-the-moment choice.

Using students in short skits to present grammar and vocabulary has several advantages over inanimate visual aids, according to Cook (p. 840). For one thing, a live person is "a more realistic, more immediate, more striking, and therefore more effective means of illustration than a drawing." Besides, using the students themselves introduces the element of surprise into the class and enlivens the teacher's presentation.

Roleplaying. Roleplaying, as it is usually done, differs slightly from the technique described above of using students to illustrate a word, a phrase or a grammatical principle. It can be done in small groups of two or more people so that all members of the class can participate at once, or with a group at the front of the class while non-participating class members watch. Its value lies more in the use and practice of vocabulary which has already been learned than it does in learning new vocabulary, but that does not matter--vocabulary learning involves not only the initial learning process but also a constant relearning, reviewing and

practice.

Culture and Vocabulary Learning. The teaching of vocabulary within the framework of the foreign culture lends itself to the groupings of words into contextually related categories (Halvorsen, p. 327). As we shall see elsewhere, research seems to indicate that students learn words in a categorized listing more easily than in unrelated groupings. In other words, context-related categories allow the student to learn vocabulary more efficiently than do alphabetized lists or vocabulary ordered according to grammatical function. Halvorson states (p. 330):

> Not only does this serve the student in the more productive use of study time, but it also aids the student psychologically in coping with the seemingly infinite number of vocabulary words that comprise the foreign language.

Learning Vocabulary through Art. A new and highly interesting method was recently presented by Dalsant.[1] Her idea is to teach (C)culture through art, but the technique also contains a strong vocabulary-learning element. The concept involves choosing great works of art (from the culture pertaining to the foreign language being taught) and then carrying out various linguistic tasks dealing with the artwork, thereby expanding the students' knowledge, understanding and appreciation of great art while at the same time expanding

their linguistic capabilities.

Some of the techniques which she uses include the following: 1) One student is sent to the board with chalk. In front of that student, where s/he can't see it, a work of art is displayed. The rest of the class directs the student at the board to sketch various items in certain locations in an attempt to recreate the artwork. Caution: this must be a fairly simple piece of art. 2) The work of art can be used as the basis for a roleplay -- a group of students is given the assignment of acting out the scene depicted in the work of art, but with words as well as actions. 3) Ask questions about the work of art which the students then answer either in writing or orally. Many variations of these exercises are possible for the teacher who has a good working knowledge of art and wishes to impart it to his/her students along with an expanded vocabulary. It should be noted that it is easy with this technique to concentrate on common, everyday words; one does not have to confine oneself to technical vocabulary.

The Root Word Approach. The root system is based on the fact that Indo-European languages have a remarkable economy. Some 50 to 100 productive roots, combined with 40-50 prefixes, can form several thousand words, many of which are of high

frequency (Keller, p. 2). All Indo-European languages (as well as a number of others) share this feature. And in some languages, such as German, many prefixes and root words can also be used alone. As Keller points out, (p. 1), "A speaker of English would find the root approach is helpful in learning French or Spanish, since English, French, and Spanish all use the same root developments borrowed from Latin and Greek. The root is especially useful when applied to German or Russian, because these two languages have vast root systems that are built on native Germanic or Slavic root forms."

Another reason why the root system can be very valuable relates to what one might call the sieve principle: the human mind is basically a sieve--most of what goes in at the top soon comes back out at the bottom. Thus, students who read a lot in the foreign language or study diligently in some other fashion will acquire new words rapidly, but they frequently find it very discouraging because these newly-learned words are often forgotten nearly as rapidly as they are learned. The root system provides a method which not only assists students in learning new words but also helps in maintaining previously-learned words in memory. A further strength of the root system is the following: the knowledge of basic

roots can help a student to recognize new words in context

without looking them up in the dictionary.

Mnemonics. Mnemonics means simply "aiding the memory." Mnemonic techniques, according to Bellezza (p. 61), "involve physically transferring to-be-learned materials into a form that makes them easier to learn and remember." Material is recoded so that a visual image acts as a mediator for remembering a given word, phrase, or sentence (Cohen, p. 44). The most common type of mnemonic device used in vocabulary learning is the so-called keyword technique, in which verbal material (a word, a phrase, or a sentence) is linked with a visual image (Cohen, 44-45). The keyword method has been found to compare in effectiveness very favorably with other vocabulary learning methods, both in the native language and in a second language.

The operation of the keyword technique is best described by Cohen (p. 45):

> A foreign word . . . is recoded into a more familiar stimulus, the keyword . . . . This keyword--a native-language word or phrase--is similar in sound to part or all of the foreign-language word. . . . Next, an interacting image is created between the . . . keyword, and the native-language word or phrase. . . . The intended result is that an encounter with the foreign word will evoke the keyword, which in turn re-evokes the imagery link, and finally the native language equivalent can then be retrieved from this imagery link. For example, in order to learn the Spanish word pato (duck), English-speaking learners create or are furnished a picture of a duck wearing a pot (the keyword) on its head. When they are asked the meaning of pato, this evokes the keyword pot, which in turn re-evokes the image of the duck wearing the pot on its head.

The imagery in mnemonics should be visual and clear, maybe even ridiculous or bizarre. If the word to be learned is abstract, the usual technique is to recode the word through an acoustic link into a more concrete word or concept in the native language.

Semantic Fields. As Cornu points out (p. 264), many linguists have argued that "some words are more closely related to other words and that the meaning of each word depends on the meaning of the other words related to it. This relationship of words has led to the notion of 'semantic field,' where words conceptually related are grouped within the same field." A lot of evidence seems to indicate that words are indeed organized in memory, which is also the view espoused by Keller (p. 12): "Research in verbal learning demonstrates that it is much easier to learn a word in a categorized list . . . than in a semantically ordered list . . . ."

Another piece of evidence in this regard is research done by Ebbinghaus on memorization. He compared the time it took to learn nonsense syllables to the time necessary to learn Lord Byron's "Don Juan." It proved to be easier to learn 80 syllables of the poem than 10 nonsense syllables. Thus, as Beheydt says (p. 60): "This not only proves that meaningful-

ness facilitates retention but also that context contributes to retention."

Below are some of the conclusions which Cornu reached based on experiments on semantic fields in vocabulary learning (p. 267):

> First, people tend to organize what they recall. Conceptually related words are remembered together. This would indicate that words are organized in memory in conceptually related categories, a notion very similar to semantic field. Furthermore, if the list presents hierarchically related words, people usually recall superordinate terms [the top word in a familial grouping] first and then hyponyms [words within the same category under the superordinates]; . . . Finally, recall is vastly improved if the words are presented in an order following hierarchic relation.

When using the semantic fields method one should not attempt to present all the words within a hierarchy at once. Rather, whenever a new word is presented, its order within the hierarchy should be related to words already known. Furthermore, this concept is more effective if a visual presentation is used, although this technique seems to work better with non-concrete words than with concrete ones. Here is an example of how it could be used: If the teacher is presenting the word "cool" and the words "cold" and "hot" are already known, she might draw a scale with those two words on it, and then indicate where on the scale "cool" fits.

Vocabulary through Music: This category can be divided into

two different but related methods. The first one is simply the use of songs in vocabulary learning. The second is a full-blown language learning method which has enjoyed alleged special success behind the (former) Iron Curtain, It is variously known as the Lozanov Method, but also as Suggestology or Suggestopedia with American adaptations that are sometimes called "Superlearning."

Let's first look at the simple use of songs in vocabulary learning. Guglielmino (p. 19) suggests that the drill and repetition of language learning can be "boring, tiring and even anxiety producing." As an antidote to this boredom, she asserts: "Songs and music provide an excellent vehicle for reviving and re-involving the bored, anxious, or fatigued . . . student." She feels that with the use of songs students tend to relax, producing a pleasant learning environment. In addition, she claims, we should not view music as just the domain of children (p. 19): "Adults sing at religious services, at parties, in bars, and as they listen to car radios, Why not in class?"

Most language-learning methods rely on left-brain modes of learning. Since most learners use the right hemisphere of the brain to process music, the use of music provides a welcome aid to learners who have a strong right-brain

orientation. Also, according to Gugliemino (p. 21), "Songs bridge the hemispheres, strengthening retention through a complementary function as the right hemisphere learns the melody and the left learns the words." Interestingly, research with people who suffer from aphasia (a loss of ability to speak) has shown that some of them can still sing a song which had been learned previously, so it is possible that both the music and the words of a song are processed in the right hemisphere of the brain.

The use of songs in vocabulary learning seems to link several learning styles: the visual (seeing the words in print); the auditory (hearing the words along with the music); the kinesic (clapping the hands and moving in rhythm to the music). One must use care in selecting songs for language instruction, however (Guglielmino, p. 19-20): "Songs which contain incorrect grammar, stress patterns inappropriate in conversation, or contain irregular sentence patterns can create problems rather than benefits for the learner."

Suggestopedia was developed in Bulgaria by Dr. Georgi Lozanov. A major assumption of this technique is that learning involves the unconscious as well as the conscious functions and that individuals are prevented from learning faster by the lack of a "harmonious, relaxed working together of all

parts of the learner" (Stevick, p. 116). This state of relaxation is achieved through the use of music--he has students lie back, breathe properly and then listen to music (carefully selected baroque music) while they hear new words and phrases repeated in the target language. Although Lozanov's claims of learning at several times the pace achieved with conventional methods has never been replicated in the United States, several studies have been done which do indicate a great deal of success with this method.

Actions. One relatively new foreign language teaching method relies exclusively on the use (by the teacher and the students) of actions in FL learning. This method is usually known as the Total Physical Response (TPR) Method and was pioneered by James J. Asher. He claims that his method is based on the model of how people learn their native language. He believes that adult learners, like children in their native tongue, should first learn to understand the spoken language and that they will then start speaking when they are ready to do so. Teachers should not force speaking from students. Vocabulary (and also grammatical features) is taught by nesting it into the imperative form. Understanding is thus synchronized with and reinforced by the physical actions which the teacher asks students to perform as the

vocabulary is being learned.

Cognates and Direct Borrowings: This method of vocabulary learning is related to the mnemonic device method. In fact, this is the easiest type of mnemonic device for the learner to grasp and remember. Similarities range from words where nothing (except usually the pronunciation) has changed, such as the words "Arm" and "Hand" in German, corresponding to English "arm" and "hand," to cognates which are less obvious, such as "Schulter" ("shoulder") or "Ellbogen" ("elbow"). Some languages also contain cognates that both languages have in common from a third language, which in the case of German happens frequently with words from Latin, Greek and French, such as "Auto," "Elektrizitaet," "Bibel," "Philosophie," etc. With cognates, however, one has to warn the student against what might be called "false friends." These include

words that are either spelled or sound like a word in English, which, however, have an entirely different meaning. An example is the German word "aktuell" (which means "current", "up-to-date" and not "actual").

Loan Translations. This category is very similar to cognates, but loan translations are a step removed from cognates. The borrowing in this instance is an expression which has been translated literally from the original

language. This category has been a very important one in post World War II German (with loan translations from English). Some examples: "Ein Schritt in die richtige Richtung," "Sie sind in demselben Boot," etc.

Soap in the Language Lab. After having observed both that students today love to watch soap operas, and that word lists are more valuable if the teacher provides sample sentences illustrating the vocabulary, Turner (p. 144) determined to break the students' resentment of what they considered to be the boring language lab by writing a "soap opera" utilizing vocabulary currently being studied in his elementary FL class. Each week he chose 25-30 vocabulary words for which the students were held accountable, and then wrote a story tape four or five minutes in length incorporating all of the new vocabulary items. The students had to listen to the tape and then answer a few questions provided with the story. After the questions were corrected, the answers and a copy of the story tape were returned to the students and the story was discussed briefly in class.

Turner indicated (p. 144) that "the inclusion of thirty vocabulary words in a small narrative text of two or three paragraphs was realized easily and imaginatively." Each week

he plotted a new episode, which adhered to the basic story line of the soap opera. Turner maintains (p. 144), "To my great satisfaction, the students not only enjoyed the tapes, but began to look forward to each new episode. And the soap opera tapes also made the tedium of the recorded grammar exercises palatable, for they were not permitted to audit the story tape until they had already completed the less interesting grammar tapes."

Analogies. According to Plaister (p. 25), "It would be advantageous for the language teacher as well as a profitable experience for the language learner to combine several aspects of language learning into one technique, especially if that technique is first, intrinsically interesting; second, intellectually challenging; and third, rewarding to the learner." Language learning through the use of analogies is such a technique, asserts Plaister. Analogies involve relationships (the students are familiar with such exercise through tests like the SAT). An example would be (in English) the following:

RACE:FATIGUE:: track:athlete
ant:bug
fast:hunger
hand:clock

This is an analogy of cause and effect, so the correct answer would be "race is to fatigue as fast is to hunger." Plaister

discovered that his students found the use of analogies in the learning of foreign language vocabulary to be interesting and, especially, intellectually challenging. Unfortunately, the materials to assist in creating these analogies are available primarily in English, such as in books to aid students in studying for standardized tests. (Plaister teaches ESL.) Nevertheless, the concept might be worth trying, especially at the college level.

The Computer. According to Agor (p. 116), "Preliminary results of surveys of second-language teachers suggest that teachers want computers to do the drudgery that they personally find dull, but are certain their students need." Computers can indeed perform this type of task. They can be used to drill vocabulary. They can be used to drill grammar rules. They can also be used to drill other facts, such as cultural information. Some teachers now find this to be unfortunate, however. Agor claimed that such attempts to use the computer will fail because, even with the computer such drills will still be boring. "Self-flagellation may be preferable to a whipping, but no matter who controls the whip, it still hurts (p. 116)."

However, there are other ways to use the computer. One such method is through games of the type which Agor (and also Sanders) devised. Agor's game, which she calls "The

Refrigerator Game" or, in its German version "Der Supermarkt," involves one student stocking an imaginary refrigerator (or store) with items which fellow students then have to guess. She claims (p. 118) that her observation of young students playing the game "confirms the view that 'Der Supermarkt' helps students learn specified vocabulary."

Putnam, in the first edition of CALICO (p. 40) had worried that "even in the short run, we are about to face a generation of students who know far more about computers than we do, and who have had far more experience with highly sophisticated games than the ones we are thrusting in front of them. What we think will motivate students may very well appear laughable to them; the thrill, if any, will wear off fast."

Agor did not, however, find this to be true. Her students gained many hours of enjoyment out of her game, which she devised with the help of the computer authoring system for the Apple Computer, SuperPILOT. What the students especially enjoyed was the idea that they could stump their fellow students with their array of foodstuffs in the "Supermarkt." But while they were having fun stumping and being stumped they were also learning vocabulary.

Synonyms. Last, but perhaps not least, let us look at some

of the problems connected with learning language through synonyms. As Martin indicates (p. 130): "As the fluency of

language learners increases, so do the errors they generate and the difficulty they encounter in achieving near-native language usage. Some of their errors are the result of first language transfer, but the majority of them are interlingual, i. e., they represent confusion among lexical items in the second language itself." She further indicates that many of the errors in vocabulary selection made by advanced learners are caused by teaching vocabulary through glosses or the use of synonyms.

Teachers cannot expect to present vocabulary so thoroughly that no mistakes will ever be made in its usage; however, they can attempt to prevent some of the misconceptions that lead to the erroneous use of lexical items. Vocabulary errors show one or more kinds of dissonance between the word and its context, according to Martin (p. 130). "The four dissonances that interfere with encoding by advanced learners are stylistic (dunk the chicken in the beaten egg mixture), syntactic (the authors purports that tobacco is harmful), collocational (I used to be a large smoker) and semantic (I was badly damaged in the accident)."

It is easy to understand vocabulary misuses such as the above by L2 learners because they are not exposed to the very large number of repetitions of the language as they are growing up (and without the interference of their native language). As we encounter words while growing up, each one occurs in a

meaningful context. Successive encounters reinforce our understanding of the word and help us to narrow down the range of its usage. We slowly develop a "feel" for the proper and improper usage for the word and gradually come to appreciate the sometimes very subtle distinction between items.

Since L2 learners, on the other hand, do not usually have the luxury of these myriad repetitions of lexical items which are afforded to L1 learners, the teacher's task must be seen as twofold: 1) L2 students need prodigious amounts of information within an artificially short time. (Here one must think of Stephen Krashen's "Input Hypothesis.") How can this tremendous amount of material be imparted to the learner? Some of it can be given at the moment when a word is first presented (Martin, p. 131) . "The teacher can compare and contrast new words with their nearest neighbors [see semantic field method], pointing out the differing contexts open to each". But so much information still remains hidden, that copious numbers of exercises are needed to refine and rein-

force a student's skill with lexical items.

Miscellaneous Techniques. A number of various additional vocabulary teaching techniques are worthy of mention: 1) Diaries. Especially in a writing class, a teacher can assign students to make entries on a daily basis or so many entries per week. Students could be required to look up a certain number of words for each entry and keep a log of new items learned, for example. 2) Have students keep a notebook containing new words which they have learned. This technique is especially valuable in a setting like on a trip or study abroad programs where the student is constantly bombarded by new words. Writing them down assures that a larger number of them will be learned. 3) Have the students look up a given number of words per day (or per week) which interest them and write them in a log. 4) Some teachers have had good success with requiring students to look up a certain number of words in a monolingual dictionary, and then learn the definition in the L2.

Conclusion. As Plaister said (p. 28), "It is axiomatic that vocabulary mastery comes only through repeated exposure to words in a context; casual explanations of the meaning of a word do not normally suffice for learning." So whatever

method or methods you use, keep that in mind. Language acquisition requires large amounts of input, natural, real input. But it also requires the opportunity to gain a great deal of practice oneself. So -- the best thing which teachers can provide for their students is this input and the opportunity to practice the language themselves.

[1]Based on Jean Dalsant's presentation at the 1989 annual meeting of ACTFL held in Boston.

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